

Benton OKs 2011 levy rate, budget

By John Trumbo, Herald staff writer

Max Benitz Jr.'s last votes on county spending were "no."

Benton County commissioners voted Monday on the county's first biennial budget, which is 2011-12, and on the property tax levy rate for 2011.

Both measures passed 2-1 over the objection of Benitz, who was defeated for re-election this month and is leaving in January after 16 years as commissioner.

Benitz said it would be wrong "to kick the can ahead" and adopt the \$109 million, two-year budget because not enough had been done to prepare "for difficult economic times that are ahead."

He also voted no on the levy rate for 2011 even though it was not an increase.

The vote to approve the budget was postponed from last week when Commissioner Leo Bowman was out of town.

Benitz cautioned his fellow commissioners Monday that, "Any hiccup in our revenue will cause us to be \$5.8 million out of round after two years."

Chairman Jim Beaver and Bowman didn't hesitate to approve the budget as presented. But they refused a last-minute request from two judges and four court employees who came from Kennewick to the meeting in Prosser, hoping to get about \$124,000 more for district court operations.

District Court Judge Terry Tanner said he wanted to be "on the record for our needs." He said the extra money would restore wages for a court clerk in Prosser, replace money cut in the last budget for office supplies and help pay for interpreter services and substitute judges when regular judges are not available.

"I know where you're going with this, but there is some reality to what commissioner Benitz is talking about," Beaver told Tanner.

"We need to be making changes right now to keep us out of trouble, and asking for more money so you can hire another employee just ain't going to work," Beaver said. "I am not going to hold on to the old way of doing business when it's going to cause us to be out of business."

On another matter, Beaver said remodeling the county's former health district office on Canal Drive so it can become a crisis response center for Benton and Franklin counties must be a priority. "If we don't combine services and finish that remodel there won't be any services," he said.

Also Monday, commissioners decided to keep talking with the Benton Fair Association about extending the lease for the county fairgrounds at least three, and possibly five, years without any major changes in the terms.

The fair association board has been interested in taking over the fairgrounds, but the commissioners have been unwilling. "This is county property and we can't do gifting of public funds," Beaver said.

Benitz noted the county has invested more than \$2 million in the fairgrounds since 2001 and extending the lease is the only option he would support.

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